

Then they entered into the fire-glow. Their appearance produced an instant quiet. The beating of the tom-tom ceased. Voices died. Dark faces stared.



There were half a hundred of them about the fires, David figured; and not a white man's face among them—a lean, night-eyed, sinister-looking lot.

DAVID thought of the girl's words a long time after she had fallen asleep. Even in that last moment of her consciousness he had found her voice filled with a strange faith and a wonderful assurance as it had drifted away in a whisper. He would not want the picture any more—because he had her! That was what she had said, and he knew it was her soul that had spoken to him as she had hovered that instant between wakefulness and slumber.

He looked at her, sleeping under his eyes, and he felt upon him for the first time the weight of a sudden trouble, a gloomy foreboding. And yet, under it all, like a fire banked beneath dead ash, was the warm thrill of his possession. He had spread his blanket over her, and now he leaned over and drew her thick curls back from her face. They were warm and soft in his fingers, strangely sweet to touch, and for a moment or two he fondled them as he gazed steadily into the childish loveliness of her face, dimpled still by that shadow of a smile with which she had fallen asleep.

Her faith in him was so great that she was going back fearlessly to those people whom she hated and feared—not only fearlessly, but with a certain defiant satisfaction. What would he have to do to live up to that surety of her confidence in him? A great deal, undoubtedly. And if he won for her, as she fully expected him to win, what would he do with her? Take her to the coast—put her into a school somewhere?

He tried to picture Brokaw; he tried to bring up Hauck in his mental vision; and he thought over again all the girl had told him about herself and these men. As he looked at her it was hard for him to believe anything so horrible as she had suggested. Perhaps her fears had been exaggerated. The exchange of gold between Hauck and the Red Brute was probably for something else. Even men engulfed in the brutality of the trade they were in would not think of such an appalling crime. And then—with a fierceness that made his blood burn—came the thought that Brokaw had caught her in his arms and had kissed her! That was the proof.

BAREE had crept between his knees, and David's fingers closed so tightly in the loose skin of his neck that the dog whined. He rose to his feet and stood gazing down at the girl. He stood there for a long time without moving or making a sound.

"A little woman," he whispered to himself at last. "Not a child."

From that moment he was filled with a desire to reach the Nest. He had never thought seriously of physical struggle with men except in the way of sport. But a soul had given itself into his protection, a soul as pure as the stars shining over the mountain-tops. He took his automatic out of his pack, loaded it carefully, and placed it in a pocket where it could be easily reached. It was a declaration

The Girl Beyond the Trail

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Illustrations by Wladyslaw T. Benda

of something ultimately definite. Then he stretched himself out near the fire and slept.

He was awake with the summer dawn. The sun was beginning to tint up the big red mountain when he and the girl began the descent into the valley. Before they started the girl borrowed his comb and brush and smoothed the tangles out of her hair, tying it back with a bit of string. But as they traveled downward David observed how the rebellious tresses formed themselves into curls again.

IN an hour they had reached the valley, where they rested, while Tara foraged among the rocks for marmots. It was a wonderful valley into which they had come. From where they sat, it looked like an immense park. Green slopes reached almost to the summits of the mountains, and to a point half way up these slopes—the last timber-line—clumps of spruce and balsam trees were scattered over the green as if set there by the hands of men. At the foot of the slopes on either side, like decorative fringes, were thin and unbroken lines of forest. Between these two lines of forest lay the open valley of soft and undulating meadow, dotted with purplish bosks of buffalo willow and mountain sage, green coppices of wild rose and thorn, and clumps of trees. In the hollow of the valley ran a stream.

And this was her home! She was telling him about it as they sat there; and he listened to her, and watched her birdlike movements, without breaking in to ask questions which the night had shaped in his mind. She pointed out gray summits on which she had stood. Off there, just visible in the gray mist of early sunshine, was the mountain where she had found Tara five years ago—a tiny cub that must have lost its mother. Perhaps the Indians had killed her. And that long, rock-strewn slide, so steep in places that he shuddered when he thought of what she had done, was where she and Tara had climbed over the range in their flight.

She had chosen the rocks so that Tara would leave no trail. He regarded that slide as conclusive evidence of the resolution that must have inspired her. A fit of girlish temper would not have taken her up that rock slide, and in the night. He

thought it time to speak of what was weighing on his mind.

"Listen to me, Marge," he said, pointing toward the red mountain ahead of them. "Off there, you say, is the Nest. What are we going to do when we arrive there?"

Little lines gathered between her eyes as she looked at him.

"Why—tell them," she said.

"Tell them what?"

"That you've come for me, and that we're going away, Sakewawin."

"And if they object? If Brokaw and Hauck say you can not go?"

"We'll go anyway, Sakewawin."

"That's a pretty name you've given me," he mused, thinking of something else. "I like it."

For the first time, she blushed—blushed until her face was like one of the wild roses growing in the valley.

And then he added:

"You must not tell them too much—at first, Marge. Remember that you were lost, and I found you. You must give me time to get acquainted with Hauck and Brokaw."

She nodded, but there was a moment's anxiety in her eyes, and he saw for an instant the slightest quiver in her throat.

"You won't—let them—keep me? No matter what they say—you won't let them keep me?"

He jumped up, with a laugh, and tilted her chin so that he looked straight into her eyes; and her faith filled them again in a flood.

"No—you're going with me," he promised. "Come. I'm quite anxious to meet Hauck and the Red Brute!"

TO David it seemed singular that they met no one in the valley that day, and the girl's explanation that practically all travel came from the north and west, and stopped at the Nest, did not fully satisfy him. He still wondered why they did not encounter one of the searching parties that must have been sent out for her, until she told him that since Nisikoo died she and Tara went quite frequently into the mountains and remained all night. Hauck had not seemed to care. More frequently than not, he never missed her. Twice she had been

away for two nights and two days. It was only because Brokaw had given that gold to Hauck that she had feared pursuit. If Brokaw had bought her—

She spoke of that possible sale as if she might have been the merest sort of chattel. And then she startled him by saying:

"I have known of those white men from the north buying Indian girls. I have seen them sold for whisky. Ugh!" She shuddered. "Nisikoo and I overheard them one night. Hauck was selling a girl for a little sack of gold—like that. Nisikoo held me tighter than ever that night, I don't know why. She was terribly afraid of that man Hauck. Why did she live

with him if she was afraid of him? Do you know? I wouldn't; I'd run away."

He shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you, my child."

Her eyes turned on him suddenly.

"Why do you call me that—a child?"

"Because you're not a woman—because you're so very, very young, and I'm so very old," he laughed.

FOR a long time after that she was silent as they traveled steadily toward the red mountain.

They ate their dinner in the somber shadow of it. Most of the afternoon Marge rode her bear. It was sundown when they stopped for their last meal. The Nest was still three miles away, and the stars were shining brilliantly in the sky before they came to the little wooded plain in the edge of which Hauck had hidden away his place of trade. When they were some hundred yards away they climbed to the top of a knoll, and David saw the glow of fires. The girl stopped suddenly, and her hand caught his arm. He counted four of those fires in the open. A fifth glowed faintly, as if back in timber. Sounds came to them—the slow, hollow booming of a tom-tom, and voices. They could see shadows moving. The girl's fingers were pinching David's arm.

"The Indians have come in," she whispered.

There was a thrill of uneasiness in her words. It was not fear. But he could see that she was puzzled, and that she had not expected to find the fires, or those moving shadows. Her eyes were steady and shining as she looked at him. It seemed to him that she had grown taller, and more like a woman, as they stood there. Something in her face made him ask:

"Why have they come?"

"I don't know," she said.

They started down the knoll straight for the fires. Tara and Baree filed behind them. Beyond the glow of the camps a dark bulk took shape against the blackness of the forest, and David guessed that it was the Nest. He made out a low building, unlighted so far as he could see. Then they entered into the fire-glow. Their appearance produced a strange and instant quiet. The beating of the tom-tom ceased. Voices died. Dark faces stared—and that was all. There were half a hundred of them